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NATION & WORLD

Stories of a troubled man



By BY ELLEN WARREN
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You don't need to be a shrink to know that Steve Elliott is a troubled man.

Just read his novels -- brimming with been-there portrayals of drug abuse, homelessness, heartlessness, rape and miscellaneous perversions.

Elliott, 33 -- a Chicagoan who now lives in San Francisco -- was a rebellious 8th-grade runaway in the '80s, who left a middle-class North Side home to live on the street (actually, mostly on the roof of a convenience store a few blocks from the family house).

Smart, streetwise, canny and conniving, Elliott gamed the system and has emerged intriguingly damaged, sweetly introspective and with enough personal baggage to inform four semiautobiographical novels -- so far.

He's also great company and seems almost sunny despite the dark territory covered in much of his writing, most recently the well-reviewed novel "Happy Baby." ("Surely the most intelligent and beautiful book ever written about juvenile detention centers, sadomasochism and drugs," said an excerpt from a New York Times review printed on the cover of the paperback edition released earlier this year.)

Elliott has been a ward of the State of Illinois, a stripper and a law school admissions counselor. Now, he's on the verge of becoming a literary (if not financial) success. He is starting to get some serious book buzz and was just named a finalist for the New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award to be announced this spring. He's a player in the hipster, cult publishing world of writer Dave Eggers and his McSweeney's Quarterly, and it was Eggers himself who edited "Happy Baby." In short, in some circles, Elliott's got -- or is, at least, getting -- rock star status.

From age 9 until he was 13, Elliott watched his mother dying from multiple sclerosis. "I was really not a good kid with my mother," he freely admits. "I just wanted to hang out with my friends and do drugs."

Hanging out with his friends and doing drugs were two areas where the boy proved especially adept. By the time Kathleen Elliott died in 1985, her son says he had escalated from pot and cigarettes (age 10) to acid and booze (11 or 12) to -- when he could get it -- cocaine and crack (12 or 13).

"He was even dead drunk and strung-out at his 8th grade graduation," e-mailed his father, Neil Elliott, an Evanston writer, who describes his son as "a bad seed" and "human garbage." He declined to be interviewed in person.

It doesn't take long in any conversation with Steve Elliott for the talk to turn to his father and the extraordinarily painful and dysfunctional relationship that continues to consume them both.

Earlier this year, Elliott was the honored speaker telling his story in the Mather High School auditorium on North Lincoln Avenue, the accomplished writer returning to the school where he defied the odds by not only quitting drugs and graduating, but by ranking in the top quarter of the class of 1990.

Standing behind the lectern in a more-or-less-pressed pale green dress shirt, pirate-size hoop earrings -- five piercings in all -- jeans and gym shoes, Elliott repeats his oft-told tale of growing up disaffected, depressed and suicidal, a runaway in middle-class Rogers Park. This miserable state of mind is confirmed by a stack of court records, obtained with Elliott's approval, from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services that outline the "highly conflicted" and "destructive pattern" between father and son.

"Running away was actually the best decision I ever made," he told the Mather kids.

By the time he was 14, Elliott was sleeping from friend to friend, often spending the night on the roof of the Quick-Stop Food Mart at California Avenue and Pratt Boulevard or in a utility closet in a brick apartment building at 6504 N. Fairfield Ave. Elliott and like-minded bad kids would hang out at the local IHOP "tripping our balls off."

Intelligent, resourceful

Court records quote Elliott's grade school principal praising the boy's "intelligence and resourcefulness" but concerned that "he was in danger of being lost altogether as a productive member of any community."

"Once you realize you can survive on the streets you become uncontrollable," Elliott says. Recapping his early teen years, he says he would return sporadically to the yellow stucco three-bedroom house at the corner of Coyle and Washtenaw Avenues, the mostly Jewish neighborhood where his father and older sister, Victoria, lived. There, he'd shower, sleep, eat, temporarily reconcile with his father -- and, sometimes, steal from him.

Throughout this period and to this day, Elliott wrote "compulsively," he says, "as a form of communicating." "Writing is something I've done for therapy, for relief." The rooftops, the acid, the horrific relationship with his father, even the utility closet and the yellow stucco house, all would appear in the books.

Records show Elliott was admitted to the children's wing of the Chicago-Read Mental Health Center on Sept. 1, 1986, after police answered a report of a runaway and found the boy, having slashed his left wrist, sleeping in the hallway of a North Side building.

A psychologist diagnosed major depression and recommended Elliott be placed in a group home because he and his father "are locked in a destructive pattern." Records obtained from Chicago-Read say, among other things, Elliott was suffering "from many unresolved issues related to the death of his mother."

For a time, the father hired a lawyer and fought state guardianship for his son in court, but "I gave up attending hearings in fall of 1986 because they were always continued," Neil Elliott e-mailed.

On July 23, 1987, a court officially found parental neglect and declared Steve Elliott a ward of the state.

He says of his father, "most of his abuse was verbal, not physical," and he provided a letter he received from his father last October. In it, Neil Elliott referred to his son with unprintable epithets and concluded, "Any questions, mother [expletive]?"

In response to e-mail questions about the letter, Neil Elliott e-mailed, "I used to yell and call names. . . . This is not a good example. My yelling was much more unpleasant than a mere letter. . . . And anyway I'm proud of this letter."

Time spent in a public mental hospital is not the usual prescription for a life-altering experience -- at least not in the positive sense. "Read was really bad, feces all over the wall and stuff," says Steve Elliott. But, through luck, force of will and canny

Elliott started attending synagogue services during the months he was in the mental hospital, not out of any religious fervor but because "in there, you can smoke and they have good food."

The rabbi got Elliott connected to the Jewish Children's Bureau, a link that would prove invaluable.

"He's not a kid that demanded anything but he commanded it," says Robert Bloom, the executive director of JCB. "He has this incredibly intense survival instinct and is one of the brightest people I ever met in my life. It seemed worth channeling that. . . . It's not often that you have an opportunity in this business to foster that."

"He can be tremendously manipulative, but he can just read people," says Bloom, who continues to see Elliott when he visits Chicago. He says Elliott has helped JCB fundraising and sent a four-figure check when he made money on his books.

Calling attention to the grim conditions at group homes for teenagers like himself is one of the subtexts of Elliott's fiction, although the system did work for him. It provided the template for big chunks of his novels -- and much more. Or, as Bloom says, he made it work.

Who knows what turns on a switch for some kids in danger of being lost forever to drugs, alcohol and other demons? Why do some overcome, prevail, even thrive while others careen out of control?

"Steve was amazing," says his friend Mike Tan who was housed with Elliott in the mental hospital and in a tough South Side group home afterward -- where both teenagers acquired Vice Lords street gang tattoos.

"He came from a time where all of us should've been dead. You know, in jail. Overdose. Whatever. He's helped himself -- with the help of other people, sure -- but he's taken opportunities and run with them," Tan says.

"He's got a light heart about the whole thing too. No grudges. He just takes whatever the situation was," Tan says. "He's got it happening, that's for sure."

Once Elliott was embraced by JCB, he was moved to a Rogers Park group home and its associated (but not very challenging) high school. One look at his high school transcript shows exactly, as Elliott says, "where I made my turnaround."

Sophomore year first semester: English, F; early world history, F; physical science, F; geometry, F.

Sophomore year second semester: English, A; physical science, A; geometry, A; computer workshop, A.

What happened?

"I was definitely using drugs to help me cope. I loved acid, and I drank a lot of cheap vodka. I was totally going nowhere. It was obvious, the path that was in front of me, and I didn't want to go down that path. I wanted to start going to school. I wanted to learn."

Elliott cut a deal with officials of the subpar school he was attending. "I said if I got straight A's could I go to the regular high school across the street [Mather], so I got them to sign a contract because I didn't trust authority." He quit drugs, he says, applied himself to the job at hand, got the A's and the transfer. There -- of all things -- he joined the Chess Club and graduated on time with mostly A's and many advanced-placement classes.

A new family

He also acquired a surrogate family, then-single mom Maria Duryea-Kmiec and her three kids, the youngest of whom, Jason

Bell, was a Mather classmate. Elliott still spends holidays with the generous woman he calls "mom" and her children (and, now, grandchildren) to whom he dedicated his novel about group homes, "A Life Without Consequences."

The Duryea house on Highland Avenue in Rogers Park became a home base on and off for Elliott's teen years. "He wasn't beyond hope. There's a sweetness about him," Duryea-Kmiec says.

With the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services his official guardian and with the embrace of JCB, Elliott was eligible for JCB scholarships. He graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a degree in history in 1994. "He knew how to play the paperwork system. . . . He knew how to go to the social workers and get the money he needed to go to school," recalls Duryea-Kmiec.

During this era, Elliott acquired more intriguing entries on his curriculum vitae, including a 1992 visit to Amsterdam that resulted in his taking a semester off from college and "working as a barker at a live sex show."

Most unusual on his peculiar resume is the year or so between college and grad school when he was a stripper in North Side gay clubs such as Bijou, The Lucky Horseshoe, Berlin and Manhole. This experience formed the basis for his third novel, "What it Means to Love You."

Avoiding workforce

Again with the financial help of the Jewish Children's Bureau, Elliott enrolled in the tony graduate film school at Northwestern. "It was a stopping point when I wasn't ready to enter the workforce, which is still true," he says. While in graduate school, he expanded his drug-use portfolio by starting to shoot heroin, an experiment with a predictably disastrous result: an overdose that nearly killed him.

"I totally almost died." But, typically, he rebounded: recovered, quit heroin, returned to school and graduated with a master's degree in cinema studies in 1996.

On a lark after that, Elliott took the Law School Admission Test because his girlfriend was taking the exam. He virtually aced it and was admitted to several law schools. Instead, he opted to work as an LSAT coach -- one of the more mainstream jobs he has held in his unique post-graduate career.

Although Chicago is almost a character itself in his novels, Elliott wound up living in San Francisco seven years ago when he ran out of money during his travels. For more than a year he held a job at a San Francisco dot-com, the longest he ever worked in one place and the only career-track, traditional position he has held.

Eager to find someone to fund his passion, Elliott -- along with 1,158 others -- applied for one of 10 Stanford University Stegner Fellowships in creative writing, a no-strings tuition and stipend opportunity. He was admitted to the two-year program in 2001, which allowed him to write "Happy Baby" without worrying about making the rent.

As if that weren't enough good fortune, while applying to Stanford, Elliott also submitted "A Life Without Consequences" and "What it Means to Love You" to the "slush pile" of unsolicited manuscripts at publisher MacAdam/Cage.

He sold both books.

Last year he also produced his first non-fiction work, a highly personal account of his coverage of the presidential campaign, "Looking Forward to It."

Today, with some six months left on a teaching gig at Stanford, the prolific and experience-hungry Elliott recently got both arms loaded with various vaccinations preparatory to a reporting trip to Uganda for a story for The Believer magazine.

He also writes a blog (stephenelliott.com), an ongoing Poker Report for McSweeneys.net, is editing a collection of other writers' short stories, his second anthology for a charity, and writing a piece on the California mudslides for Esquire magazine.

And what about his next novel? That's unclear. But, he says, "I'm tired of writing about myself."

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